
M o d e r n S t i l l L i f e



Whitney Museum of American Art, Fairfield County
April 22–June 29, 1983

"Modern Still Life" presents for the first time a selection of twentieth-century still lifes from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. The works in the exhibition were selected by Pamela Gruninger, *Manager, Fairfield County*. Special thanks are extended to Lisa Phillips, *Associate Curator, Branch Museums*, and Patterson Sims, *Associate Curator, Permanent Collection*, for their advice and suggestions, and to Janet Satz, *Assistant Manager, Fairfield County*, for her help in preparing the exhibition.

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Cover

Wayne Thiebaud. *Pie Counter*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Larry Aldrich
Foundation Fund 64.11.

Modern Still Life

Selections from the Permanent Collection
of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Still-life painting, in one form or another, has existed for centuries. We know that as early as the third century B.C. the Greeks were painting still lifes, and we have Roman examples—paintings, frescos, and mosaics—from the first century B.C. During the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, still life as an independent art form disappeared. But gradually the Renaissance pursuit of naturalism in the spirit of antiquity created an interest in the representation of objects for their own sake. The Italian painter Caravaggio (1573–1610) is credited with having painted the first modern still life. His *Basket of Fruit* of about 1596 is “definitively stripped of religious or intellectual allusions and ranked on an equal footing with the human figure.”¹ The components appear in “a strictly realistic setting without any romantic undertones, concentrated lighting bringing out the full plasticity

of volumes, and clearly ordered composition.”²

The art of still life was fully developed and popularized in seventeenth-century Northern Europe, when distinct categories of the genre—meals, flowers, fruit, game and fish, and allegorical *vanitas* pictures—emerged in the works of Flemish and Dutch painters. The still life as it was known in Europe did not arrive in America until the early nineteenth century. Until then, the few “still lifes” painted had been merely decorative adjuncts in portraiture.³

It was Raphaelle Peale (1774–1825) who first introduced the independent still life into American painting. And he, like many nineteenth-century American still-life artists, drew upon Dutch examples for his models. John Wilmerding points out that the reason Dutch art appealed so to Americans was that it reflected a shared culture, based in part on Protestant-



Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio.

Basket of Fruit, c. 1596.

Oil on canvas, 18½ x 25¾ inches.

Pinacoteca Ambrosiana, Milan.

ism, commerce, material well-being, and scientific exploration. Moreover, the Dutch, like the Americans, were fascinated by the objects and activities of daily life. Thus, from the start of the nineteenth century, American still-life painting expressed "concern for the palpable and real world, for solid things naturalistically rendered and fixed in measured spaces."⁴

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, there emerged in America a popular brand of still life called *trompe l'oeil* ("deception of the eye"). William Michael Harnett (1848–1892) and John Peto (1854–1907) were two of its consummate practitioners. Their images of objects on a shelf or pieces of paper affixed to a wall are the ultimate in illusionistic painting—their aim was to convince the viewer that the painted elements were real. This goal seems not unlike that of today's Photo-Realists, although the results are significantly different. Whereas the *trompe-l'oeil* composition is made to look like three-dimensional reality, the Photo-Realist painting is made to look like a photograph, that is, a two-dimensional reproduction of the real world.

Before discussing the works in this exhibition, it is worth noting two things about still-life painting in

general. One is that the notion of separate genres—still life, landscape, and the human figure—is somewhat artificial in that it implies distinct styles peculiar to each. In fact, the approach to each subject has more to do with the artist's personal form of expression and prevailing influences.

Second, according to Ingvar Bergström, a leading Dutch still-life specialist, "a still-life painting is a representation of objects which lack the ability to move . . . and which are for artistic purposes grouped into a composition."⁵ The first thing the artist does is to actively arrange passive objects in terms of their color, texture, shape, etc. Once the desired composition has been achieved, the artist is free to concentrate on pictorial problems. A still-life painting, unlike works in other genres, becomes self-referential in two ways: it calls attention to the process of making art and it calls attention to the arranger/artist.⁶ This raises the question of whether or not still-life paintings are inherently autobiographical. On the one hand, it can be argued that the selection of certain objects over others reflects the artist's taste and desires. On the other, given the impersonal, neutral character of many traditional still-life subjects—a vase



Raphaelle Peale. *A Dessert*, 1814. Oil on wood panel, 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 19 inches. Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr.



John F. Peto. *Office Board for Christian Faser*, 1881. Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches. Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr.

of flowers, a basket of fruit—the artist's intentions seem to have more to do with issues of representation than of selection.

In twentieth-century America there have been relatively few still-life specialists who achieved the vanguard status of their nineteenth-century forebears. The art scene in the early 1900s was for the most part dominated by the Ashcan School, with its concern for urban realism. It was only the early American modernists who were even interested in the still-life subject, under the influence of European art.

The Cubists found still lifes to be the perfect models for their pictorial and spatial investigations. Their process of fragmenting objects into multiple planes had a profound effect on American painters in Europe, one of whom was Stuart Davis. In his *Egg-beater, Number 2* of 1927—one of four pictures he painted of an eggbeater, rubber glove, and electric fan nailed to a tabletop—he set up the still life and was then free to develop the composition so as to arrive at formal patterns of colors and shapes.⁷

After World War I, a group of artists—including Charles Demuth, Preston Dickinson, and Charles

Sheeler—who did not work together or form any kind of school, were dubbed "Precisionists" for the exactness with which they rendered their images. Precision in one form or another has always been characteristic of still-life painting. In the case of the American Precisionists, their involvement with the painting of industrial architecture, with its geometric shapes, hard, straight lines, and planar structures, was a decisive factor in the evolution of their styles.

Unlike the works of the other two Precisionists, Demuth's studies of nature differ markedly from his investigations of industrial sites. His close-up studies of flowers and fruits were almost always done in watercolor on a white background. The results are precise in rendering, but not geometrized like Dickinson's and Sheeler's compositions.

Sheeler's art was directly influenced by his work as an industrial photographer. In fact, he often used photographs as the basis for his paintings. From the start his attitude toward the visual world—exact, scientific, and calmly detached—informed both his photography and paintings.⁸ The Shaker-style house he lived in provided the simple architectural environment he chose to depict in his art. In *Interior* of 1926,



Charles Sheeler. *Interior*, 1926.
Oil on canvas, 33 x 22 inches.
Whitney Museum of American
Art, New York; Gift of Gertrude
Vanderbilt Whitney 31.344



Georgia O'Keeffe. *The White
Calico Flower*, 1931. Oil on can-
vas, 30 x 36 inches. Whitney
Museum of American Art, New
York; Purchase 32.26.

the exactitude of Sheeler's forms creates an overall geometric pattern of lines and planes.

One of the few early American modernists who chose to concentrate on still lifes, Georgia O'Keeffe brought a whole new dimension to the genre. Like Demuth, she preferred a close-up view of the subject matter, but toward a different end. Her magnification of the single flower into an abstract pattern of curvilinear forms in *The White Calico Flower* of 1931 has landscape and figurative associations beyond the information it provides about the flower.

In addition to the modernist experiments of Davis, O'Keeffe, and Sheeler, there was a strong current of conservatism in American art during the twenties and thirties, as seen in the still lifes of Henry Lee McFee and Yasuo Kuniyoshi. This conservative tradition was carried on by Walter Murch, a leading still-life specialist in the forties and fifties. During these last two decades, when Abstract Expressionism was on the rise, such traditional subject matter as still life had little relevance for most artists. The exception is the renowned artist and teacher Hans Hofmann, who adopted Cubist principles in his work. He had been interested in still lifes prior to his involvement with

Abstract Expressionism and throughout his career continued to use natural motifs as the basis for his paintings.

With the return to realism in the early 1960s, still lifes once again appeared in the mainstream of art. The Pop artists' reliance on everyday items from popular culture led to some of the most imaginative still lifes ever produced. *Still Life Number 36* of 1964, one of a series by Tom Wesselmann, presents the all-American images of a glass of milk and a submarine sandwich, along with a sliver of a landscape and a package of Montclair cigarettes. The stars and stripes affirm the Americanness of his motifs. The most startling aspect of this painting is its huge size—its complete departure from the normal scale of a still-life painting makes an obvious reference to the billboards which decorate American highways. The sheer monumentality of Wesselmann's images turns them into something other than the banal objects they represent.

Another artist who has been influenced by billboards is James Rosenquist, whose juxtaposition of seemingly disparate images forces the viewer to question the relationships implicit in conventional



Tom Wesselmann. *Still Life Number 36*, 1964. Oil and collage on canvas; four panels, 120 x 192½ inches overall. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the artist 69.151.



James Rosenquist. *U-Haul-It*, 1967. Oil on canvas; three panels, 60 x 169 inches overall. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Avnet 68.38.

still lifes. In *U-Haul-It* of 1967, a skillet with a lump of melting butter and a clock (a traditional still-life motif to indicate the passage of time), a repeated image of a car doorframe above a landscape, and a silhouette of a car windowframe with a streak of blinding sunlight create multiple, open-ended associations, beyond the range expected of a still life.

The isolation of objects, integral to every still-life painting, is carried to an extreme in Wayne Thiebaud's *Pie Counter* of 1963 and *Triangle Thins* of 1971, in which the individual element is repeated across the surface of the picture. Duplication is also an important aspect of Andy Warhol's art. His mechanical reproductions of the same image over and over again in series echoes our mechanized society and asserts the banality of all imagery. Jim Dine's *The Toaster* of 1962 uses repeated images for different purposes. His work presents the various means an artist has for representing an object—an unadorned outline, a realistic rendering (in the tradition of *trompe l'oeil*), and an abstract form—juxtaposed with the object itself. Fundamental questions concerning the nature of art and life, and how the two overlap, are raised in the process of looking at this work.

Irony and humor play central roles in the works of Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg, and Lucas Samaras, all of whom have created three-dimensional still lifes and transformed objects in the process. Johns' single slice of bread on a gray field looks real, but is in fact made out of lead. Its relationship to reality is further subverted by the vertical presentation of the bread, which is antithetical to a realistic presentation of the subject, shown, for example, on a table. In the end, this isolated slice is raised to the status of an icon. Samaras' *Transformation: Scissors* of 1968 plays upon the notion of function; each pair of scissors has been transformed into a decorative object that cannot cut. Oldenburg's choice of untraditional subject matter—French fries and ketchup—is presented in a decidedly unsensual fashion: yellow elongated vinyl bags covered with an ooze of red vinyl.

Ever since its invention, the camera has affected how we perceive the world and how artists choose to depict it. Perhaps the Photo-Realist paintings of the sixties and seventies demonstrate the most direct effect photography has had on art. Richard Estes' *The Candy Store* of 1969 is a re-creation of a real scene that he photographed, although in piecing



Roy Lichtenstein. *Still Life with Crystal Bowl*, 1973. Oil and magna on canvas, 52 x 42 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.64



William Bailey. *Eggs*. 1974. Oil on canvas, 34½ x 44¾ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.4

together several photographs to produce the final image, the artist did change certain details.

The diversity of approach to the still life might best be summarized by looking at William Bailey's *Eggs* of 1974 and Roy Lichtenstein's *Still Life with Crystal Bowl* of 1973. Both subjects fit Bergström's definition of a still life and yet the images represent opposing possibilities of the genre. Bailey's composition descends in a straight line from classicism to the present. Like Caravaggio's, his forms are naturalistic, neatly laid out on a shelf, and bathed in an all-over light. However, his work differs from that of other still-life painters by the fact that he paints from memory.⁹ This may explain the otherworldly quality that competes with the "natural" appearance of Bailey's paintings.

Lichtenstein, on the other hand, has chosen a traditional still-life motif and transformed it into a highly stylized system of dazzling colors and simplified forms which bear little resemblance to the "natural" world. Objects are recognizable only through clichéd color and shape—the apple, for instance, is designated by a red, flattened heart shape

with a curved reflection window.¹⁰ Also of interest is his handling of transparent materials, such as crystal, which in this case is represented by a conventional graphic system of black decorative lines on white.

Although the still life as a field of specialization has not been the concern of twentieth-century American artists, the genre has periodically captured their imaginations. From the early modernist experiments of Davis and O'Keeffe, to the cerebral expressions of Dine and Johns, to the Pop works of Lichtenstein, Thiebaud, and Warhol, to the sculptures of Oldenburg and Samaras and the classicized compositions of Bailey, artists have expanded the definition of a still life and the means for representing it.

Pamela Gruninger
Manager, Fairfield County

Notes

1. Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 62.

2. Ibid., p. 85.

3. See John Wilmerding, "The American Object: Still-Life Paintings," in *An American Perspective: Nineteenth-Century Art from the Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr.*, exhibition catalogue (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1981), p. 88.

4. Ibid., p. 86.

5. Quoted in ibid., p. 87.

6. Ibid.

7. See William H. Gerdts, *Painters of the Humble Truth: Masterpieces of American Still Life, 1801–1939*, exhibition catalogue (Columbia, Mo.: Philbrook Art Center with the University of Missouri Press, 1981), p. 252.

8. See Wolfgang Born, *Still-life Painting in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 45.

9. See John Gruen, "William Bailey: Mystery and Mastery," *Art News*, 78 (November 1979), p. 140.

10. See Jack Cowart, *Roy Lichtenstein, 1970–1980*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Hudson Hills Press, Inc., in association with the St. Louis Art Museum, 1981), p. 46.

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches, height preceding width, preceding depth. Dimensions of works on paper refer to sheet size. All works are in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

William Bailey (b. 1930)

Eggs, 1974

Oil on canvas, 34½ x 44½

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.4

Jack Beal (b. 1931)

Still Life with Plant and Mirrors, 1965

Oil on canvas, 48 x 54

Neysa McMein Purchase Award 65.67

Rosalind Bengelsdorf Browne (1916–1979)

Compotier II, 1938

Tempera on paper, 12½ x 9¾

Gift of the artist 77.115

Arthur B. Carles (1882–1952)

Bouquet Abstraction, c. 1930

Oil on canvas, 31¾ x 36

Purchase 53.41

Stuart Davis (1894–1964)

Eggbeater, Number 2, 1927

Oil on canvas, 29¾ x 36

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.169

Charles Demuth (1883–1935)

August Lilies, 1921

Watercolor on paper, 11¾ x 17¾

Purchase 31.422

Preston Dickinson (1891–1930)

Interior with Flowers, c. 1924

Oil on canvas, 26 x 20

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alan H. Temple 59.45

Still Life, Bread and Fruit, c. 1925–28

Oil on canvas, 30 x 28½

Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.174

Jim Dine (b. 1935)

The Toaster, 1962

Oil on canvas with electric toaster, 100 x 80 x 7

Gift of the Albert A. List Family 70.1578

Richard Estes (b. 1936)

The Candy Store, 1969

Oil and synthetic polymer on canvas, 47¾ x 68¾

Gift of the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art 69.21

Janet Fish (b. 1938)

Painted Water Glasses, 1974

Oil on canvas, 53¾ x 60

Gift of Sue and David Workman (and purchase) 74.15

Audrey Flack (b. 1931)

Lady Madonna, 1972

Oil on canvas, 78 x 69

Gift of Martin J. Zimet 72.42

A.E. Gallatin (1881–1952)

Composition, 1941–45

Oil on canvas, 50 x 20

Gift of Mrs. W. Floyd Nichols
and Mrs. B. Langdon Tyler 53.24

Hans Hofmann (1880–1966)

Magenta and Blue, 1950

Oil on canvas, 48 x 58

Purchase 50.20

Jasper Johns (b. 1930)

Bread, 1969

Embossed lead relief, 22¾ x 16¾

Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 69.86

Savann Can with Brushes, 1977

Color lithograph, 53½ x 31½

Gift of the artist 77.109

Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953)

Things on Iron Chair, 1936

Oil on canvas, 44¼ x 34

Given in memory of Edith Gregor Halpert
by the Halpert Foundation 75.13

Roy Lichtenstein (b. 1923)
Still Life with Crystal Bowl, 1973
Oil and magna on canvas, 52 x 42
Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.64

Goldfish Bowl, 1978 and 1980–81
Color woodcut, 25 x 18½
Purchase, with funds from the Print Committee 82.3

Jan Matulka (1890–1972)
Arrangement with Phonograph, 1929
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.298

Henry Lee McFee (1886–1953)
Crow with Peaches, 1928
Oil on canvas, 30½ x 24
Purchase 31.301

Walter Murch (1907–1967)
Medley, c. 1950–51
Oil on canvas, 27 x 20
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.35

Georgia O'Keeffe (b. 1887)
Single Lily with Red, 1928
Oil on wood, 12 x 6½
Purchase 33.29

The White Calico Flower, 1931
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Purchase 32.26

Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929)
French Fries and Ketchup, 1963
Vinyl and kapok, 10½ x 42 x 44
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Meltzer 79.37

James Rosenquist (b. 1933)
U-Haul-It, 1967
Oil on canvas; three panels, 60 x 169 overall
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Avnet 68.38

Lucas Samaras (b. 1936)
Transformation: Scissors, 1968
Mixed media, 51½ x 36½ x 36½
50th Anniversary Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis 80.18

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)
Interior, 1926
Oil on canvas, 33 x 22
Purchase 31.344

Saul Steinberg (b. 1914)
Giant Table III, 1974
Mixed media on wood, 35¾ x 85½
Promised gift of an anonymous donor P.28.80

Joseph Stella (1877–1946)
Still Life, c. 1929
Oil on canvas, 15 x 24½
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. N.E. Waldman 58.52

Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920)
Pie Counter, 1963
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36
Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund 64.11

Triangle Thins, 1971
Etching, 29¾ x 21½
Purchase 72.46

Bradley Walker Tomlin (1899–1953)
Still Life (Inward Preoccupation), 1939
Oil on canvas, 34 x 46
Purchase 42.10

Andy Warhol (b. 1925)
Flowers, 1970
Portfolio of ten silkscreens (four in exhibition), 36 x 36 each
Gift of David Whitney 71.179a–j

Tom Wesselmann (b. 1931)
Still Life Number 36, 1964
Oil and collage on canvas; four panels, 120 x 192½ overall
Gift of the artist 69.151

Photographs by Geoffrey Clements, cover and pp. 3, 4, 5 (right),
Helga Photo Studio, p. 2 (right), Eric Pollitzer, p. 5 (left); and Larry
Reynolds, p. 2 (left).

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Whitney Museum of American Art
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